

**QUALITY PARISH COUNCILS
(Report by the Head of Administration)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Government has formally launched the Quality Parish Council scheme, announced in the 2000 Rural White Paper, which is designed to enhance the role of parish and town councils, develop a framework for partnership working and equip them to take on a stronger role for the benefit of the local community.
- 1.2 The scheme envisages that a Charter will be established between principal and local councils as to how they will work in partnership and the devolving of particular functions and services by principal councils to quality parish councils.
- 1.3 Details of the implications of the quality initiative are set out below.

2. THE QUALITY CRITERIA

- 2.1 Quality status is designed to be achievable by all parish councils, irrespective of their size or level of activity. It is granted for 4 years to qualifying councils, following which they need to re-apply for accreditation.
- 2.2 To achieve quality status, a parish council must pass 7 tests relating to its electoral mandate (i.e. contested elections), the qualifications of the Clerk, a minimum of 6 meetings per annum, communication with the local population, an annual report, unqualified accounts and registration of member interests under the code of conduct.
- 2.3 The first two parish councils to achieve accreditation in the County are Huntingdon Town Council and Holywell-cum-Needlingworth Parish Council. CALC have advised that a further 5 or 6 councils are likely to achieve quality status later in the year.

3. THE CHARTER

- 3.1 Government guidance envisages that a Charter will be entered into by principal councils with their parish councils. A model charter has been issued, part 1 of which relates to all parish councils and part 2 to quality councils only. Part 1 deals primarily with consultation, liaison and support and attempts to formalise the governance, partnership and consultation arrangements that currently exist between principal and parish councils. Part 2 however requires a principal authority to have regard to parish plans and village design statements produced by a quality parish and introduces an enhanced role and the devolution of functions and service provision to quality parishes. Charters can either be general in nature and apply to all quality parishes or be tailored to relate to individual agreements between a principal authority and a single parish council.

3.2 The guidance lists a series of functions that might be considered for delegation to parish councils by principal councils:-

- ◆ Control of markets
- ◆ Street cleaning
- ◆ Maintenance of highway verges, footways and footpaths
- ◆ Litter collection and litter control measures
- ◆ Street lighting (other than principal routes)
- ◆ Recycling provisions
- ◆ Street naming
- ◆ Parking restrictions (and related matters)
- ◆ Issue of bus and rail passes and other transport voucher schemes (eg taxi vouchers)
- ◆ Road safety measures
- ◆ Noise and nuisance abatement
- ◆ Tree Preservation Orders
- ◆ Some aspects of development control
- ◆ Some aspects of the management of libraries and museums
- ◆ Some aspects of leisure and tourism provision (eg bowling greens, playing fields, issue of leisure permits)
- ◆ Public conveniences
- ◆ Allotments
- ◆ Taxi and public entertainment licensing.

4. FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS

4.1 The Government has also issued a guidance note on financial arrangements with parish and town councils which is specifically aimed at avoiding 'double taxation', i.e. where a parish council provides a service but the principal authority still charges taxpayers in the parish for the equivalent services it provides elsewhere.

4.2 The guidance suggests the principles that should govern financial arrangements between the different tiers of authority, including fairness, simplicity, transparency, democratic control and accountability. It suggests that where services are devolved to parish councils, an agreed level of funding is also transferred by the principal authority to enable the service to be delivered.

5. CURRENT SITUATION

5.1 With the first of the councils within the County having received accreditation, CALC recently convened a meeting of representatives of the County Council, those Districts that contain parishes in the County, and town and parish councils themselves. In order to assess the implications of the quality initiative and draft a County-wide Charter for consideration by individual authorities, the meeting agreed to the establishment of two working parties to deal with the content of the Charter itself and with the question of double taxation. Membership of each working party will comprise one voting representative from each of the County, City and District Councils (six in total) and an equal number of CALC representatives. Officers may attend in a non-voting capacity.

5.2 CALC is seeking conclusions from the working parties by the end of December and for formal agreement by individual authorities to enable the Charter to be introduced with effect from the commencement of the municipal year 2005/06.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 If agreement can be reached, the quality parish council initiative will introduce significant changes to the relationship between the District Council and the town and parish councils within Huntingdonshire and the local delivery of a range of services that are currently provided by the Council. To enable discussion on the detailed implications of the initiative to proceed, the Cabinet are invited to participate in the working parties. Agreement on the adoption of the Charter locally will need to be the subject of a further report to the Cabinet at a later date.

6.2 It is therefore

RECOMMENDED

- (a) that the Cabinet appoint one Member to each of the working parties to be established to consider the Charter and double taxation; and
- (b) that a further report be submitted to a future meeting on the adoption of the Charter and the detailed implications of double taxation.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme issued by the Office of the deputy Prime Minister, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and The Countryside Agency.

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